

- Fazendeville as “the village” and that it was like a township. (Personal Communication)
- 3 The *gens de couleur libre* or “free people of color” had a unique social and legal status recognized in antebellum Louisiana. See Jerah Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans: A Fragment of the Eighteenth-Century French Ethos,” in Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, editors, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1992) and Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803*. (Durham, Duke University Press, 1997).
 - 4 Jerome A. Greene, Historic Resource Study, Chalmette Unit, Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1985), 205-208.
 - 5 In 1926 there were a total of 69 students that attended the one room school house which ran from the first through the eighth grade.
 - 6 Letter from Secretary of the Interior, Fred A. Seaton, to Mr. Chad F. Calhoun, Vice President, Kaiser Aluminum & Chemical Corporation, dated April 9, 1959.
 - 7 *St. Bernard Voice*, Friday, April 24, 1959: 1. Excerpts of a letter from Mrs. Edwin X. deVerges, President of the Chalmette National Historical Park Association to Congressman F. Edward Hebert, dated April 17, in article entitled, “Wants Fazendeville.”
 - 8 Kevin Risk, *Chalmette Battlefield and Chalmette National Cemetery: Cultural Landscape Report*. (Cultural Resources Stewardship Division, National Park Service, Southeast Regional Office, 1999), 1.
 - 9 *Management Policies 2001*, in *Ethnographic Resources*, 5.3.5.3., (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, NPA S1416/December 2000): 57.
 - 10 *The St. Bernard Voice*, Arabi, La. Friday, November 27, 1964, Vol. 75, No. 46:1.

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Audrey L. Brown

African-American Churches as Ethnographic Resources

Churches are perhaps the most common ethnographic resources of African Americans — significant places and spaces in their lives. Even those who no longer attend, often return to church in nostalgic memories or in person for homecoming or home-going celebrations.

While schools, mutual aid societies, and other social institutions evolved from churches, there is little research about day-to-day details of that process. Ethnography can be the link that documents and preserves such knowledge and thus illuminate the cultural meaning of the “church” in African Americana. This article offers a glimpse of that process through ethnographic

description of a “Singing” and “Giving” ceremony commonly held in rural Florida Afro-Baptist churches since the 1930s or earlier. I compare it to a 1998 “giving” ceremony at a national Baptist conference and use anthropological theory to explain its’ cultural significance.¹

From 1981-1985, I lived in Jerusalem, Florida, a church community established in the post-bellum period. Other church members and I became involved in documenting and preserving community cultural traditions like the Men’s Federation of Brothers in Christ “Singsings.”²

Excitement was running high in Shady Grove church when I got there for a Federation “Singing” held Christmas Sunday, 1983, instead

of its usual fourth Saturday night. Federation choruses, called by their church names — Jerusalem, Shady Grove, Welcome Stranger, Progressive Union, New Zion, and Greater Hopewell, performed a “Singing” and “Giving” monthly. Accompanied by piano, guitar, and sometimes drums, the Federation sang for churchwomen and children, teenage girls, and a few men and boys. If former chorus members “turned out” to listen, they were cajoled to sing with their group.

Each chorus numbered from five to 10 members, the older the men the fewer their numbers. Jerusalem’s five members were 45 to 70 years old. Welcome Stranger, the youngest Federation church, had two adult members, the rest were boys.

Uncle Armstead, reciting Federation history, said “This Federation is not the first Federation in Jerusalem. This Federation is only seven years old. They had a Federation when I was a young man...(1930-1940)....”

The Federation president’s wife struck up piano chords and the men began to march in from the back of the church down the center aisle, in a swaying, side-to-side motion, singing as they came.

We...Come this far...by Faith...Leaning on the Lord and I’m trusting...his holy word...Ohhhh...I can’t...turn around...He never failed me ...No!...[Everybody sings]...He never failed me... Yet!

The president spoke first, “warmin’ up the peoples” and “gettin’ the Spirit to movin’.” Throughout, piano chords punctuated the delivery, men exclaimed “Well!” and women shook tambourines. In call and response, people answered “Amen” with “Amen” and echoed cries for “Mercy.”

Brother Chaplain, followed, after “linin” a hymn,³ he began singing “I Love Jesus” in a strong voice. Onlookers and the choruses sang back, “Nothing...but...the Righteous,” call and refrain, ending in unison, “Shall...see...God....”

“Let the Church say Amen!” he called the church to prayer:

Let us say Amen again!... You know we here tonight to lift the name of Jesus...Amen? You know we gotta’ lots to be thankful for tonight!...AMEN?... The Lord done spared us to see the last third Sunday in nineteen hundred and

eighty-three... We don’t know if we’ll meet on another third Sunday or no... We had one member to decease an’ that was Brother Joe

This evening our Heavenly Father...The Father of Abraham,...Isaac and Jacob... We trying to give kind and sincere thanks for you keeping... Us in the world until this present time....

Holy Father I know you heard me pray a long time ago... We believe if we pray and pray right you’ll hear me pray again...And for that cause we gonna ask you to have mercy....

Holy Father we wantah pray tonight that you would go with the sick and ‘flicted ones... The lame,...the blind,...the orphans... and widders... Over the land, country and everywhere... We know that you has all power in your Hands...And for that cause we gonna ask you to have mercy.

So it went until the piano chords softly ended and people fell silent.

Then the men sang mightily. Songs included *I’m Climbing Up the Rough Side of the Mountain* and *There is Power in the Blood*. They followed with *I’m Pressin’ On*, *Holding On to My Faith* and *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*, and other songs. They closed with “the Holy Spirit ran from heart to heart and from breast to breast.”

Each pastor spoke briefly after the “Singing,” then came the “Giving.” The audience marched counter clockwise around the church to give their “offering.” Federation men gave out boxes [of food] and “checks” to elders with few or no relatives, the disabled, hospitalized or “burned out” [of their home], to families without bread-winners. They gave to the “widders and orphans,” the “downcast and oppressed,” and to “sick and ‘flicted ones,” the “poor and the needy,” we had prayed for earlier, begging for the Holy Father’s mercy, now delivering it through the Federation’s grace.

The Federation is no more, but a call to cousin Georgie informed me that about four years ago a group of six choirs formed the Heavenly Visions Federated Choirs of Marion and Citrus Counties. The new group includes choirs from Jerusalem, Welcome Stranger, Progressive Union, White Star from Orange Lake and the Dunellon Male Choir of New Second Bethel Church members. They perform each

Men's Federation of Brothers In Christ Banner Thanksgiving Singing, 1983, New Jerusalem Baptist Church, Jerusalem, Florida. Photo by the author.

fourth Saturday night. Georgie says “they leave the offering with the host church and the Brothers help out choir members who are in need.”⁴ So the cultural form continues in the present.

In 1998, at the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) I heard “warm up” speeches and prayers in the Federation genre. A “Giving” ceremony by the Revelation Corporation followed in the mutual-aid tradition of the African-American church.

The Revelation is a 20 million member “buying pool” of the PNBC, Christian Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal church conferences and the National Baptist Convention, USA Inc. Revelation offers members a consumer credit network for \$4.95/month, funneling the proceeds back into the community, 30% each to participating churches, church-supported schools and the balance into a first-time home buyer's mortgage assistance fund. That day, four historically black colleges, selected by the denominations, each received \$100,000.

The post-bellum records of Freedman's Savings and Trust Company document that church-based mutual aid societies met the social welfare needs of newly freed African Americans. Well into the 1940s, such groups fulfilled these functions, a tradition that continues. In 1983, 42% of Florida church people interviewees reported belonging to mutual aid societies. Contemporary Washington, DC, church programs care for “downcast,” homeless, “sick,” AIDS victims, substance abusers, and other “flicted ones.”

This ethnography shows that church-based cultural performances and “Giving” ceremonies do more than reinforce passive acceptance of an uncertain existence, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz might suggest.⁵ Like Abner Cohen, I hold that through such everyday acts, subordinated people express resistance and create informal institutions mitigating the effects of socio-economic inequities.⁶



For many younger African Americans and people of other cultural heritages, our churches are simply buildings, often without the structural integrity for a National Register nomination. For them, appreciation of such structures as ethnographic resources may be of little significance without this kind of insight into their cultural meaning.

Notes

- ¹ This article is based on research funded by NIH, NRSA, Post-Doctoral Advanced Dissertation Research Support Grant NSF, 1998-1999, Research Training Grant 1984-1987; Smithsonian Graduate Research Fellowship, 1995; Smithsonian Pre-Doctoral Fellowship, 1998.
- ² Church community oral traditions tapes are available from the author.
- ³ “Lining” a hymn is an old church custom once done to help people who couldn't read.
- ⁴ Personal communication, Georgie Lewis Jackson, Jerusalem, Florida 3/08/2001.
- ⁵ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973 [1966]):6-9.
- ⁶ Abner Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976 [1974] 18-34, 65-88).

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